Ek Chadar Maili Si

Rano and Mangal

THIS film is a good example of how a promising theme can be smothered to death under a heavy layer of vulgarity by our Bombay film makers. One glimpses in it an attempt to say something about the way people are trapped in institutions—epitomised by the institution of a man's widow marrying his younger brother—and of how women pay the heaviest price to keep the family going, although men too, must often sacrifice their personal desires, in order to be good sons and husbands. But this idea is barely developed, because the film maker is so intent on dishing up a degraded version of Punjabi culture—a potpourri of abusive language, crude jokes, cabaret posing as folk dance, plus the usual mixture of violence, sex and sentimental religiosity.

While the film incorporates all the structural and other limitations of the novel on which it is based, for example, the inadequately worked out ending, it also adds distortions of its own, chiefly visible in an attempt to romanticise. This is clearest in the characterisation of Rano and Mangal. In the novel, Rano actively dislikes her first husband, Tiloka, and although initially shocked by the proposal that she marry Mangal, later develops a strong attraction to him. Egged on by other village women, she makes an all-out attempt to seduce him, and finally succeeds by getting him drunk and then stripping, The other woman in Mangal's life is not a romantic heroine, as she is in the film, but a poor Muslim who is insultingly treated by him, and has ambiguous feelings towards him.

The film sanitises the entire situation by toning down the village women's advice to Rano, omitting significant details such as her having offered her breast to the child Mangal, and becoming pregnant by him towards the end, by altering the seduction scene, and by introducing the unconvincing romance between Mangal and a gypsy girl as also the episode of Munni's suicide attempt. The film thus ends up being neither fish nor flesh—neither the all-out expose of the sordid realities of family life that Bedi's novel tries to be, nor the typical Bombay melodrama cum romance.

What I found most significant was the deliberate distortion of the Punjabi milieu so as to forcefully "integrate" it into the "national mainstream" of Bombay film culture. In the novel, the family is very definitely a Sikh one. In fact, the hero is dragged by his long hair to his wedding. In the film, except for the old blind father, all the men have cropped hair and the milieu is Hinduised. This point is driven home at the end when the family goes on a pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi, to the blaring strains of the Sherawali Ma song. This is followed by the disgustingly sentimentalised repentance of Tiloka's murderer who is shown as atoning for his sin by marrying Tiloka's daughter without dowry. This is made out to be a moment of spiritual exaltation for all concerned—although we are not told how the high spirited Munni likes the idea of marrying her father's killer.

In the novel, the family does not visit Vaishno Devi nor is there any mention of the murderer repenting. The family's acceptance of the murderer's proposal of marriage is shown as inspired by the desperation of poverty, not by magnanimity. It is another example of how socioeconomic pressures mould people's lives, just as the *chadar dalna* was.

Apart from conceptual distortions, the film grates on the nerves because of overacting, falsity of detail (Punjabi village women wearing Gujarat emporium fabrics), and the assault on the sensibilities by painfully loud music, vulgar dancing, unaesthetic visual content and overall lack of taste. The best that can be said of it is that it is better than the *Mard* type of film—which is not saying much.

—Ruth Vanita